

PRAGMATIC CONSTRAINTS FOR CODE SWITCHING
IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN DIALECT

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The European-American culture, founded on an assimilation of various cultures, established an identity, a set of values, behavioral patterns and linguistic patterns that indicated a North American culture. We know that English and even more, American English, as a language has an unusually mixed lexicon. And in that mixture we easily use direct expressions from other languages such as *faux pas* or *hors d'oeuvre* from French or *canoe*, *canyon* or *patio* from Spanish. But in the past, there has been little mixture of the African-American dialect into European-American English.

The lack of linguistic mix in European-American English was doubtlessly influenced by the past viewing of African-American English as a substandard version of Standard American English. Then in the late sixties we learned that Black English was an equal, but different, language. Speakers of African-American English were considered bilingual if they also used European-American English. Through the subsequent years, African-Americans have been speaking each dialect with members of each culture. Indeed, they have been taught to keep each separate. Recently, there have been studies (see Martin, Hecht, and Larkey 1994, for a summary) on intercultural communication between African-Americans and European-Americans and the problems that arise from the differences in communication patterns and values.

While the inter-ethnic communication may be problematic, the purpose of this research is to consider only the brief code switching in the European-American and African-American interaction. Recent observations indicate a definite linguistic change as some African-American dialect is being assimilated into European-American English. For example, the use of "yo" and giving a high five as greetings or saying "bad" (for good) or "right on", "chill out", or "Mickey D's" is becoming familiar in European-American English. While incorporation of African-American English seems to be on an individual basis, group observations may be made. Last year we were collecting data on gang language. When white police officers, specializing in gangs, provided us with many examples of African-American slang and dialect (yo, hood, homeboys, homegirls, a hood bang, a ride) as gang language, they were questioned concerning the ethnic background of the source. They declared the samples given were not ethnic boundary samples but were gang language across races. This may or may not be a fact,

but in either case it points to the assimilation in the listener's perception at least. It's possible that neither listener nor speaker know they are using African-American English. On September 26, 1994, Rush Limbaugh advertized his program by describing the women of Pompeii as short, fat, hairy and in your face. Since Rush Limbaugh is theatrically opposed to any diversity from the white male heterosexual, the use of an African-American expression by him is the ultimate marker of assimilation, probably unrecognized assimilation.

European-Americans could be demonstrating such use only if the language use were available in the input, and the input would have to be accepted as different but not sub-standard. The input language in the environment is evidenced in core black culture demonstrated in popular cultures such as music, TV programs or movies as well as in actual code-switching in the real world.

Code-switching is commonly defined as the alternation of two languages within a single discourse, sentence, or constituent. Researchers have concluded that once code-switching is produced it is governed by linguistic constraints (Grande 1990; Poplack 1980). Past studies have focused on describing where in language code-switching occurs (Berk-Seligson 1986; Pfaff 1979; Poplack 1980).

The trigger for code-switching has been assumed to be factors such as the bilingual ability of the speaker and the hearer and the perceived norms of the speech situation. Labov (1972) said the situation was the primary influence on verbal behavior. Gumperz (1982) studied code-switching as a discourse skill.

However, Myers-Scotton (1988) identified two types of code-switching. She called one an unmarked choice with switching unrestrained. The other, was a marked choice with the switching of languages occurring consciously in order to change the interactant balance. Heller (1992) noted that code-switching can represent a normal, routine way to use language or it may violate expectations about how to behave. Myers-Scotton (1993) expanded her theory to explain that markedness does not view code-switching or the choice as based on norms. But rather a marked choice means the speaker knows the society norms for the situation or for the expectations for speaker behavior and the speaker wants to do "something else". She says that something else is a marked choice.

Little has been written specifically about African-American code-switching. Nearly two decades ago Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor (1977) postulated that African-Americans would use the ethnic language increasingly in more public and formal situations as a process of group redefinition. Furthermore, they postulated that code-switching into their ethnic language would be a way of

maintaining identity and solidarity. However, recently DeBose (1992) claimed that little research has been conducted on code-switching in African-American English and Standard English. He said African-American English was often associated with poor uneducated African-Americans, while Standard English was associated with middle-class African-Americans.

Likewise, Grande (1990) reported that Spanish speakers frequently avoided code-switching when in the company of those who had negative attitudes toward non-English speakers. Grande said recently, however, due primarily to the younger generation and their eagerness to maintain their Hispanic identity while in an American environment, code-switching has become a prestigious symbol of bicultural identification, as well as a strategy of neutrality among educated Spanish speakers. If this is so among Hispanics, then we might expect code-switching to be important for African-Americans.

The marked choices for code-switching, the conscious and often unexpected choices are important linguistic decisions reflecting a cultural communication. The authors interpret choice to include the decision to switch as well as the decision to not switch.

While code-switching seems to be occurring, at the same time some code shifting seems off limits for African-Americans. For example, a few years ago as the senior author was devising lessons in cross-cultural communication for the classroom, and the African-American informant told her the African-American children could be asked to use greetings like "yo" or the high five but never to ask any African-American child to give a little dap. Showing children from other cultures how to give a little dap would be a serious transgression against home and cultural values.

If then some code shifting is appropriate and other code shifting would be inappropriate, the question for this research is generated. The purpose is to investigate what are the pragmatic constraints for code shifting for speakers of African-American Dialect. That is, are there pragmatic constraints that govern a marked choice to code-switch?

The data for this study was provided by six informants. The informants were all African-Americans, college educated, middle-upper middle-class, fluent users of both European-American English and African-American dialect, and between 20-40 years of age. They represented geographic diversity including New Orleans, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Salt Lake City, and Boston. Myers-Scotton (1993) stated that types of people more likely to make marked choices in discourse were those who had more potential for upward mobility and those who had already arrived at a prestigious

position. The informants were all in these groups.

All information was gathered in individual interviews. Each person was asked to talk about when he/she would consciously code-switch, what governed those choices, and to describe specific examples. Further probing differed with each individual until clear understanding of any constraints could be identified.

RESULTS. In order to code individual responses, constraints were identified and then subdivided to account for all of the data. Formulated definitions for each constraint are as follows:

- Greetings:** Discourse which is used to initiate an interaction. There are no ethnic or gender boundaries, but this greeting is used only with an established friend.
- Closings:** Discourse which is used to terminate an interaction. There are no ethnic or gender boundaries, but this closing is used only with an established friend.
- Humor:** During an interaction, humor (e.g., joke) is used as a means for establishing a rapport with the listener. Listeners can be a single person or a group and there are no ethnic or gender boundaries.
- Dap:** A form of non-verbal discourse interaction that is never to be used with non-African Americans.
- Kindred Spirit:** Interpersonal identity used to establish relationship, closeness, acceptance, and a sense of togetherness. There are no ethnic or gender boundaries.
- Exclusion:** Interpersonal communication used to establish non-group membership. Often, these speech acts are tied to anger. Ethnic boundaries may be crossed.
- Exploratory:** Interpersonal communication used only with an African-American listener to determine if there is shared knowledge/identity.
- Certain People:** Interpersonal identity that forbids dialectical shifts with certain listeners regardless of race or gender. This decision is made by the speaker.
- Protective:** The speaker identifies a situation that requires dialect usage in order to establish in-group membership.

- Stressful:** Stressful situations which cause an unconscious switch to dialect.
- Formal:** A speech or discourse situation in which the switch to dialect would never be made (e.g., in an interview or while speaking with superiors, or making a presentation.)

Results from the collected data are presented in Table 1. The data are divided per constraint type: discourse, interpersonal, and situational. Within each constraint, specific conditions are identified. Results are presented in percentage of participants responding to each identified condition, rather than percentage of utterances or specific examples.

TABLE 1
Pragmatic Constraints Identified by
African-American Participants

<u>Constraint</u>	<u>Percent Reporting</u>	
	<u>Appropriate</u>	<u>Inappropriate</u>
Discourse:		
Greetings	100%	
Closings	83%	
Humor	17%	
DAP		67%
Interpersonal:		
Kindred Spirit	100%	
Exclusion	83%	
Exploratory	100%	
Certain People		100%
Situational:		
Protective	100%	
Stressful	50%	
Formal		100%

Within the discourse constraints, there was substantial agreement among participants that they code switched for greetings and closings. Examples provided included, "What's happening" and "Hey Bro", in greeting, and "I'm outa here" and "Check you later", in closing. With regard to humor, only 17% of the participants identified appropriate usage of code-switching under this condition. In this sense, code-switching was used when telling jokes or to add humor in a physically demanding situation by saying, "lift that barge" or "tote that bail". The majority of participants did not agree they would code switch here on a predictable basis, but they did not label it inappropriate. In the

condition of dap, which is a non-verbal action often used in greetings, or as expressed in a line from a rap song, "We be puttin' out the dap with the rap", there were 33% of the participants who did not identify this as an inappropriate condition because they did not know the meaning of dap. All those who knew what dap was agreed that it was inappropriate to use as a code switch.

Nearly all participants agreed upon code-switching within the interpersonal constraint, with regard to appropriate, as well as inappropriate usage. The kindred spirit condition elicited an appropriate usage among all participants (100%). The initial indication of this category occurred at the Academy Awards when Whoopie Goldberg looked up, spotted Whitney Houston in the audience, and said "Hey girl, you know we don't have one of these for you...." We asked an informant what this type of code-switching was and she labeled it kindred spirit. All other informants were very positive about this label. Another example of this was a college student in Mississippi who spent most of a semester insisting she never used Black dialect. Near the end of the semester, she walked up and said to the Anglo professor, "Hey girl, I do be lovin' this class". An example of exclusion, which had a result of 83%, included an informant who was arguing with her family to select the best realtor, not necessarily an African-American. Due to her frustration, she changed discourse to European-American English to demonstrate to the family that they were excluded. Most of the participants agreed they would code switch to either African-American dialect or European-American English to show exclusion. The next category, the condition of exploratory was identified by all participants. This condition encompasses situations in which the speaker is testing the unknown listener for ingroup cohesion. Participants connected this type of code switch to African-American listeners for whom cultural pride or identity had not been established. The final interpersonal condition, certain people, was also identified by all participants; however, in this case as an inappropriate condition for code-switching. Examples included listeners who, for reasons not clear to the speaker, command a certain deference that prohibits the use of code-switching. These people were identified by the person not by the position or title the person had. For example, one informant mentioned his father-in-law.

The third major area, situational constraints, included protective, stressful, and formal categories. These constraints are a deviation from Myers-Scotton's (1993) definition of marked code-switching in that examples elicited for this study were marked, however the choice, while conscious, was expected rather than unexpected. For example, under the condition protective, an informant identified situations in which he switched to African-American nonverbal dialect when entering a certain inner city neighborhood as a way to be seen as belonging. Code-switching, non-verbally or verbally, becomes a necessity to physically or

emotionally protect oneself in certain environments. Indeed, in some of the cases reported it would be defined more appropriately as changing dialect. With regard to stressful conditions, only 50% of the participants identified the use of code-switching. An example of this condition is public speaking situations where nervousness triggers the switch. The switch in these situations is often both conscious and unconscious. Finally, all participants agreed upon a condition in which code-switching is inappropriate. This was formal situations, such as job interviews, meetings with an employer or supervisor, and official group meetings such as a department meeting. These were identified as situations where one would consciously avoid code-switching. Traditionally, this is expected of the African-American speaker.

Within each constraint section, Discourse, Interpersonal, and Situational, there was one category that prohibited code-switching under certain conditions. Participants identified, consciously, conditions in which they would not code-switch -- marked or unmarked. The pragmatic constraints identified by the informants included marked choices for both appropriate and inappropriate code-switching.

DISCUSSION: Data were primarily collected via interviews and reflect the participants' recollections of code-switching. Results, therefore, may not be an accurate or complete reflection of the marked usage of code-switching. In addition, at least one participant described the study as involving a touchy subject which is not acceptable in the mainstream. Further, she was reluctant to provide the names of other potential subjects for fear of "losing" some friends. As with the mode of data collection, this apprehensive attitude may also be reflected in the results. That is, participants may have consciously or unconsciously altered or withheld responses. Thus, this study is only an initial study and should be followed by further investigation where extensive examples of actual marked code-switching could be collected.

This study demonstrates that even if marked code-switching means using other than the expected there appears to be a definite intent to switch before the proposition. And the intent to switch codes is governed by pragmatic constraints. Some pragmatic constraints have been identified that are specific and defined prior to the interaction. While there are boundaries to acceptable code-switching, there are also boundaries marking prohibited switches. Through this study the following constraints were identified: Interpersonal, Discourse, and Situational. This is significant in that in the past, code-switching has been discussed in terms of inter- and intra-sentential linguistic constraints (Grande, 1990; Poplack, 1980). In addition, Labov (1972) identified/discussed the effect of the situation, but in this study we see that constraints can be more specifically identified and

defined. One of the most interesting may be the interpersonal constraints because researchers have noted that sharing in a communication situation was defined by African-Americans as personal bonding and by European-Americans as sharing opinions (Martin, Hecht, and Larkey, 1994).

The initial concept in this paper was that European-Americans are assimilating some of the African-American dialect into European-American English much as European-American English has assimilated lexicon from many cultures. The assumption was that incorporation of the dialect was an indication of cross-cultural awareness and acceptance that had not been present in the past. This seemed to be a positive cultural exchange. However, one of the informants had a long discussion with an author on the negative impact of the word assimilate. For him, words like "assimilate" or "incorporate" meant that the dominant culture was absorbing the non-dominant culture. Another informant indicated that African-Americans who used the dialect openly were contributing to the loss of identity. She felt such people were becoming Anglo-Africans. From this perspective, a much better term to label what is happening linguistically is to call it shared discourse space. Whether the phenomenon is called assimilate or shared space, we still view the changes as positive cultural exchange. But after completing this paper, the question must be raised as to whether the European-American linguistic use of African-American dialect represents any real recognition or appreciation of the African-American culture. Likewise, the European-American use may be purely structural with little semantic or pragmatic competence. These were not the purpose of the current paper, but issues are raised for further research.

It is clear that the participants in this research were middle-class, college-educated African-Americans and they could identify and agree on the pragmatic constraints for code-switching. Two decades ago, at least one article (Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor, 1977) predicted code-switching would occur more frequently as African-Americans searched for redefinition. These people were all proud of their identity and it seems probable that the code-switching used by people in prestige positions is much more likely to be picked up by European-Americans than the same dialect used by less educated people from lower classes.

In spite of the subjectiveness of the data collected, there does exist a pattern of marked code-switching which reflects a renegotiation of identity (whether linguistic or cultural we cannot say) within our culture. In many instances, marked code-switching represented the unexpected, as defined by Myers-Scotton (1993), but this study also identified instances which were conscious and expected.

While code-switching may remain taboo for some people within the African-American culture, attitudes are shifting -- enough is occurring across cultural boundaries reflecting a desire to share cultures. The conscious sharing of linguistic codes across cultures is exciting.

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